

# *Gen Zers' Confrontation with the Post-Truth Era: A Birds Aren't Real Perspective*

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**Abstract:** In October of 2021, a group of young people in San Francisco held up placards in their hands, delivering a truth that seems to be a complete delusion. This article, through the search and review of related literature and based on the potential insights that the "Birds Aren't Real" movement provided, will examine how the people of Gen Z are using their dynamic interactivity with new media to resist the centralization of media discourse and the post-truth phenomenon. The thesis concludes that, the Generation Z group has accelerated the decentralization of media discourse, sparking a ferment of anti-surveillance activism and offering potential directions for the future of digital media diversity and equality.

**Keywords:** Generation Z, New Media, Post-truth, Activism Movement, Government Surveillance

## 1. Introduction

In October of 2021, a group of young people in San Francisco held up placards in their hands, delivering a truth that seems to be a complete delusion. They tried to claim that birds are not real animals but governmental drones that monitor the public's lives. This movement called Birds Aren't Real was initiated by a group of young people classified as Generation Z (which appeared as Gen Z in the following), and the ultimate purpose was to rebel against the conspiracy theories currently prevalent on the Internet. There are currently less focused discussions on the dismantling of "Birds Aren't Real" and the role of Gen Z in the changing media discourse, this paper attempts to provide a focused summary of separate discussions in several directions.

This article, through the potential insights that the Birds Aren't Real movement provided, will examine how the people of Gen Z are using their dynamic interactivity with new media to resist the centralization of media discourse and the post-truth phenomenon. The first construction is to illustrate the inevitability of Gen Z's confrontation with authorized discourses and post-truth by offering the media use context of Gen Z, the new media forms when Gen Z enters digital society, and their relationship with new media. The article then returns and tries to deconstruct the Birds Aren't Real movement to explore how it represents the underlying logic of Gen Z's rebellion against media centralization. Gen Z uses the illusion of common sense as a metaphor for the opaqueness and lag in communication created by the media's invisible surveillance system and the potential exploitation of the masses' right to truth in the new media environment. Ultimately, the article hopes to use Gen Z's operation process to generate more thoughts on how to reclaim the right to hold the truth in the

new media context. The thesis is based on the search and review of related literature centering on generation Z and the post-truth phenomenon of digital media, with grounded research on the case of the Birds Aren't Real movement. The thesis aims to provide a preliminary vision of the alteration and focus of digital media with Generation Z's entrance. In addition, the thesis also provided conclusions on the visible evidence of the continuing development and changes of mass media, especially on the confrontation of mass media with the authorized media.

## **2. Generation Z: A Critical Approach to the World**

This section is dedicated to an analysis of the unique way generation Z entering the digital society, it will be illustrated from several perspectives-the characteristics and digital background of Gen Z, the continuing changing media ecology in the era of Gen Z, and the intimate and reciprocal relationship between Gen Z and new media branches.

### **2.1. Examining Gen Z's Digital Background**

The Gen Z "nature," the digital context when Gen Z was born, and the rather interactive way Gen Z uses new media function together to decide Gen Z's path to reveal the media's underlying surveillance system and to bring back the truth. Gen Z refers to the group of people largely believed to be born after 1995 [1]. Their growing path has some similarities to the last "new generation" that was born between 1990 and 1995, but in a more unique and, to say, radical way. It is, speaking from a larger scale, the most racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse generation[1]. Therefore, it is an important topic to talk about the desire for equity, proper self-representation, and sufficient self-expression for them. The development of the digital world brings international visions with more openness. This is likely to grant this new generation more sensitivity to marginalization and newer and more revolutionary ideas and thoughts. Meanwhile, in the digital age, one-third of teens have not read any books for pleasure in the past year; compared to previous generations in their age group, Gen Z has also seen a dramatic decline in reading [1]. Their main resources for getting information have changed to mobile and various new media platforms. For news, especially, according to Lichy and Kachour's survey among Gen Z Facebook users, over 40% of them use multiple SNS platforms as a combination of their news sources, while the number of Gen Y (often referring to the generation born between 1990 and 1995) is only 10% [2]. Such major shifts happen not only due to the difference between generations but also to the rapid growth of new media.

### **2.2. Evolution and Iteration of Media in a New Era**

As Gen Z grows, new various media forms also grow. Several structural changes to the online environment provide Gen z with different yet fresh ideas about their journey online. To begin with, the near dichotomy between Gen Z and traditional media is closely related to the digital context in which Gen Z emerged online. While those who grew up in the 20th century can still recall life before smartphones and the Internet life, for post-millennials, there was no life before these powerful, fast, connected technologies. They can't imagine life without digital technology because they've never lived without it [3]. It thus provides Gen Z with a natural way to receive information through the mass digital environment rather than a single acquisition method. It is a time of "coerced digital participation," and it is hard to evaluate the extent to which society could be disconnected from the digital world [4]. Secondly, in today's online community, factual news, journalistic "spin," and citizen journalism are merged into the digital information flood [2]. Other than the solo and often one-way delivery of information, the encoding and decoding of information are intertwined and could sometimes happen at the same time through multiple paths. And such changes brought one significant change to the masses: online, especially in SNS communities, it is

becoming harder for each person to get an accurate, strict, and complete path of fact delivery. While simultaneously, the mass is unprepared and seemingly does not know how to be fully prepared to discern the truth from information origins, for they are flooded and almost "drowning" in data. Rapid information flow weakened the possibility for a long-term, consistent agenda-setting process. As the truth may seem truthful when the context of it remains clear, the changing agenda provides a breaking point for Gen Z to root for the truth. Finally, an important notion concerning Gen Z and the Birds Aren't Real movement is "platform surveillance. Platform surveillance, according to Wood and Monahan in their definition of it, refers to the fundamental way digital platforms change social practices and relations in an often invisible way [5]. Other than commercial profits from the surveillance actions discussed widely in recent years, it is important to notice the governmental side of the potential shifts in online power relations. And this is what Gen Z and the movement "Birds Aren't Real" paid attention to.

### **2.3. Features Gen Z Brings to the Digital Media**

The new digital media environment has several significant characteristics that are associated with Gen Z. As Rue infers in her article, more media platforms (especially social networking sites) are emerging and developing to cater to Gen Z's different preferences for online communication[1]. In other words, the online community heavily influenced Gen Z to become what they are today. Three important points also stand out in the movement of Birds Aren't Real.

The first would be the deeper intergenerational gap. The rapid development of digital technology and its associated social norms can make intergenerational differences even more pronounced, as any Gen Z parent knows when trying to text their kids with okay[3]. And this could reflect another characteristic of the highly-digitalization world, that the iteration and discontinuity of online social codes and behaviors are happening more frequently. So Gen Z groups tend to form online communities according to their interests and specified communication ways. And these are the medium where they could actualize more things. The second would be the more frequent activism content online with more diffusion and independence between information communities. Activism was started more frequently among Gen Z communities, for example, hashtag activism or fan activism. Finally, the activism nature of the Gen Z group online partly comes from the current emphasis on social media platforms. They seek instant validation and acceptance through social media and curate their personas to filter conflict[1]. In terms of physical time, as the world shrinks, Gen Z values their online lives more and more, and as a result, they are more easily lonely and marginalized. Therefore, there is a greater emphasis on receiving equal treatment online, and a greater willingness to help and understand marginalized groups through online news. In addition, ideological exchanges are also happening more frequently online. Gen Z is thus more inclusive and wants to make the digital society such an environment as well.

### **3. Birds Aren't Real: A Chance to Rethink Online Identity and Power**

As their concerns of activism movement, Gen Z, specifically Peter McIndoe, started Birds Aren't Real - a national campaign that alleges most birds in North America were killed and replaced with drones or other surveillance objects by the government [4]. McIndoe himself experienced a period of growth in his so-called conspiracies environment, which is credited with playing a significant role in his decision to launch this campaign. He was home-schooled and told that "evolution is a massive Democratic brainwashing program and that Obama is the Antichrist," he said [4]. In high school, he was provided a gate to the mainstream culture, social media. Massive social media platforms offer a medium to exchange ideas and search for new perspectives. He claimed that his

true education consisted of internet information, and soon he found he was not the only one on this misinformation path.

As mentioned in the last part, the new media environment brought us into certain dilemmas. The fact that the general public is becoming more passive in receiving and agreeing with the truth, rather than seeking it, and that a loss of privacy is spreading not only online but also offline is reflected in the core of this movement.

To put it another way, *Birds Aren't Real* first and foremost provided an opportunity to rethink the public's identity and power in the digital world, as their slogan goes, "wake you up from the lie." The constructive metaphor that birds are drones that are governmental-assigned to monitor citizens' lives firstly brought up the idea of surveillance. Indeed, big data and digital surveillance are concepts that are tied up with our everyday practices of searching the internet: from engaging with friends to online shopping[6]. Accompanying the invasion of privacy is the scandal of overusing digital data to manipulate commercial causes or political profits. The more severe fallout of misinformation, according to the article evaluating the post-truth consequences, is when it is wrapped up as a conspiracy theory, that even if it is claimed false, people are less likely to accept the original official information[7]. It reflects the importance of what the movement is trying to point out, and the movement has an organic dismantling of this negative outcome by offering a casual, almost joke-like response to the conspiracy. This form of counter-protesting strips the legitimacy of the debate and groups those ideas with a family of ideas more similar to what they're saying[8]. If to conclude the movement, the twenty-two years old Claire Chronis, one of the organizers of the movement, claimed that the movement "is fighting lunacy with lunacy". And such response, according to the Gen Z's dealing with the social media landscape, spreads viral-like brought its jokey underpinnings more meanings.

The way this "squad" of Gen Z organizers actualize the movement and bring factual attention to the problem is another takeaway from *Birds Aren't Real*. Again, it is essential to emphasize that one of Gen Z's characteristics stems from their almost immersed experiences with social media. The impact social media has on changing discourse and opinion trends is huge. If television has turned politics into entertainment, then social media has arguably turned politics into a giant high school [9]. As politicians use social media as a tool to construct characteristics, activists use it to construct belief. The *Birds Aren't Real* movement spent a significant amount of time promoting themselves on social media platforms. It also established its final base online. As mentioned previously, the intergenerational gap is deeper, especially online, where Gen Zers are developing their own new system of communication. That is one explanation why the elderly tend not to distinguish the components of jokes in the saying "birds aren't real." The founder, Peter McIndoe, told *Teen Vogue* in an interview that they were searching for a proper place for comedy to step in and provide a new form of counter-protesting [8]. It is a see-through of social media that, despite being a chaotic mess with misinformation and the delay or even lack of truth, is a medium for the seemingly ridiculous truth to step out without the irrationality it is disguised as.

#### **4. Vision: New Angles Against the Post-truth Phenomenon**

Gen Z is taking over the online discourse and changing it. The new communication style that Generation Z brings to media society attracts both positive and negative attention. As for the three characteristics laid out in the previous content, they all claim a more interactive and discrete way for the new generation to receive information. While as for the findings also in Lichy and Kachour's survey on Gen Z's use of Facebook, one major result turns out to be that almost 58% of Gen Z participants reported that they only read on Facebook [2]. And that ultimately brings the users to a passive way when receiving news and sharing events. Also, Lichy and Kachour found that the activism in the message of SNS communities is not automatic and spontaneous [2]. It is

users' active actions that grant it other meanings. Therefore, one potential harm from this is the dangerous information gap that wraps up the factual messages even more. And another one would be the centralization caused by the backlog of information. As more data sources appear online, the lack of message output increases the message's single authority; if fewer people question and transcribe it, more will receive and believe it. Other than the centralization caused by the backlog of information, another potential harm would be the obvious information gap. It is of users' tendency to actively change and adjust the way messages are delivered online to ensure their new form of interactivity with messages on the proper track.

So from this perspective, Gen Z's influence on the media brings potential new angles for users to take advantage of these platforms. One significant part is the rising attention to changes to online regularities. Government surveillance, as Birds Aren't Real brought up, is a society-wide problem that harms citizens. The government uses the online data collected for various purposes, whether it is for preventing security breaches, terrorist activities, or to generate citizen profiles for commercial profit. While the level of surveillance often wanders to the extent of crossing legal boundaries, According to research about government surveillance, there indeed needs to be a balance between security and the citizens' fear of losing their privacy [10]. This movement would function as a targeted pledge against this imbalance and a rather aggressive call for policy change on the part of the government, as well as a call for the public to pay attention to the potential threat posed by this imbalance.

Finally, according to the Birds Aren't Real movement and Gen Z's rise, a tricky question brought up would be that will there be structural changes to the relationship between media and users. The post-truth phenomenon is a product of the still unbalanced power to digital content of producers, or to say, regulators and users. As new media forms evolve, there is a seeming tendency for users to become producers. For example, the UGC (user-generated content) culture applied in multiple and large online communities helps maintain the dynamic interactions and sustainable production of content. Is there any possibility of a further change to this situation, as movements like such are trying to call for the actual right of truth and a more transparent channel of online information exchanges?

## 5. Conclusion

Through Birds Aren't Real, Gen Z brought the invisible surveillance that is happening frequently into the visible mode, expressing a loud declaration to authoritative media-it is a desire for self-expression and liberation of the right to know the truth. Gen Z's deconstruction of centralized discourse stems from its own background of immersing and precise interpretation of the new media environment. Amidst the ever-changing release of facts in the flood of information, Gen z actively seeks the truth underneath the layers of wrapping with keen insight and understanding of the current digital society. This integration of new media forms, especially social media like Tik Tok or Instagram, and the advantages taken from its highly interactive, uncontrollable nature to resist centralized discourse is a rather meaningful action. Birds Aren't Real movement provides a solid example of the dissection of truth in this new media age, and Gen Z provides a solid social context for the dissection of truth in this new media age. The thesis is based on the Gen Z perspective, which attempts to explore new forms of anti-media hegemony, but it lacks further elucidation on the implementations of the new approaches discussed, as well as related quantitative research, which the argument supports. Future research will engage in a deeper dialogue with Gen Z groups and explore more concrete anti-centralization and anti-surveillance actions.

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